

Sharing Your Message: Developing and Delivering Effective Messages to Promote Family Support

Effective child abuse prevention messages can increase awareness, build community support, change attitudes, teach skills, and reinforce healthy behaviors. Research shows those that take a positive approach, emphasizing the many ways communities can support and strengthen families, are more likely to resonate with the public. These messages may take many forms, depending on your goals and who you are trying to reach. The key to changing behavior is to tailor each message to reflect the point of view of a specific target audience. When developing messages promoting safe children and healthy families, keep the following considerations in mind.

Choose the Right Audience

Who are you trying to reach with your message? In selecting a target audience, consider what specific behavior you want to impact and what specific group of people will have the greatest ability to influence or change behavior to make communities more supportive of children and families. Then tailor your message and method of delivery accordingly. For example, a message that works for child welfare professionals may be ineffective for parents.

Understand Your Target Audience

Once you have selected the right audience, developing an effective communication plan requires some knowledge of or preliminary research into the beliefs, behaviors, and preferences of the target audience. Different groups have different parenting norms, different views on child abuse and neglect and of the role of the community in family life, and different ways of approaching the issue. As a result, they may raise different objections or encounter different barriers in changing their behavior. You will need to tailor your message to reflect the cultural context, in order to help your audience overcome barriers and accomplish the desired change.

Consider the Method of Communication

Your method of communication is a vital element in reaching the intended audience. Part of your research into the target audience will be to understand how they prefer to receive information. What media do they watch/listen to? Are they more likely to read a poster or watch a video? Then, tailor your message to the appropriate medium. What sounds moving in a speech, for example, may be too long or complex for a poster.

Consider the Messenger

When deciding who will deliver the message, the most important consideration is whether that messenger will be credible to the intended audience. Several factors impact this. Audiences often are more receptive to messengers they perceive to be similar to themselves (racially, culturally, etc.). For instance, if you want to reach students, involving student leaders from the group you are addressing (e.g., athletes, sorority members) is a highly effective approach.



Audiences also are more receptive when the messenger is someone they trust and perceive as knowledgeable. The signature of a medical doctor or psychologist may lend credibility to an OpEd about the health and mental health effects of child abuse. Finally, parents can serve as powerful messengers about the need to support families and protect children. When parents partner with program staff to speak out about the positive changes in their own lives, others gain valuable insights and may be moved to take action to help themselves and their neighbors.

Consider the Message

The message itself is, of course, the most important element of all. When developing messages promoting safe children and healthy families, there is some evidence that positive motivations and emotions, rather than negative ones, may be more effective. For instance, a message about positive ways that communities can strengthen families is likely to be more readily accepted than one that emphasizes the civil and criminal consequences of child abuse and neglect. Likewise, acknowledging that parenting is difficult for everyone may help your audience identify with the need to support all parents. The following are other strategies that can assist in developing an effective message:

- ☆ Use relevant, localized statistics and figures in addition to or instead of national ones. (Many States provide State and local information about child welfare on the website for their Department of Social Services or Child and Family Services.)
- ☆ Aim to support and increase positive behaviors.
- ☆ Use “we” language when talking about social behaviors.
- ☆ Be culturally sensitive, including possibly developing the message in languages other than English.

